

Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA)

What is VITA?

The Internal Revenue Service's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program offers free tax help to people who cannot afford professional assistance. Volunteers prepare basic tax returns for taxpayers with incomes below \$35,000, including the elderly, Limited-English Proficient and people with disabilities. Assistance is provided at community and neighborhood centers, libraries, schools, shopping malls and other convenient locations.

Volunteers come from all walks of life, including members of the local community. They also come from other sources like corporate, academic, professional, accounting, retirement, religious and community groups.

How does VITA benefit Low-Income Residents?

By eliminating the costs of commercial tax return preparation, VITA volunteers help preserve the value of tax credits, such as the Child Tax Credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit. These tax credits can put additional money back into the hands of eligible taxpayers.

Another advantage to VITA is that people can electronically file their federal income tax returns at no charge. When you sponsor VITA, you can be involved in offering IRS e-file to your customers. IRS e-file means that your customers can have their tax refunds in as little as 10 days, and it is more accurate, with less than a 1% error rate.

What do I need to consider before sponsoring a VITA site?

In general terms, here are the major resources involved with sponsoring a VITA site. Your conversation with the local IRS SPEC office will help determine your sites needs, since availability of resources can vary from one locality to another.

- **Physical space** where taxpayers can come to have their returns prepared.
- **Computer(s)** that can be loaded with tax preparation software. At least one must have an Internet connection to electronically transmit (e-file) the returns. Also, printer(s) to print the taxpayers' copies of the returns and related office supplies.
- **Recruitment of volunteers** -- Volunteers may be recruited from within your organization and from the community. Use your knowledge of the community to locate your volunteer pool. Sometimes, other partner

organizations in the area can assist with volunteer recruitment, but that is not always the case. You will arrange with volunteers the number of hours they will spend, but all volunteers must be willing to initially devote time for training.

- **Site Coordinator** -- This important position involves general management of the VITA site, including scheduling of volunteers, loading software and updates, transmitting returns, resolving e-file rejects and reporting to the IRS. Many organizations use a paid staff person for this position.
- In addition to volunteer tax assistants, the site will need volunteers who can act as **screeners** and individuals who can serve as **computer troubleshooters**.
- **Hours of operation** -- You will have great discretion in setting site hours, but they should be at times convenient to the target population. Some sites elect to prepare returns by appointment to aid in scheduling volunteers' time.
- **Software** -- Generally, IRS furnishes the software for return preparation and e-filing. Some mature organizations furnish their own. IRS currently provides TaxWise brand software for VITA sites.
- **Training** -- IRS will arrange training for the volunteers and site coordinator. Class time is approximately four days for tax law and one day for TaxWise software training. However, tax law training can now be taken on the volunteers' schedule using the IRS web-based training, *Link & Learn Taxes*. Volunteers are tested at the conclusion of training. The local IRS SPEC office will discuss with you the best method of training for your site.
- **Tax expertise** -- IRS maintains a tax help site especially for VITA volunteers. It is important to remember that VITA is designed to prepare the simple, wage earner-type returns.

Who can I contact to locate VITA sites in my area?

To find out where the VITA sites are in your area, call the IRS at 1-800-829-1040 during tax season. A list of Tax Counseling for the Elderly (TCE) sites is available by calling 1-800-227-7669 during tax season. You can also log onto the AARP web site (www.aarp.org) and find out where other free tax assistance is offered in your area.